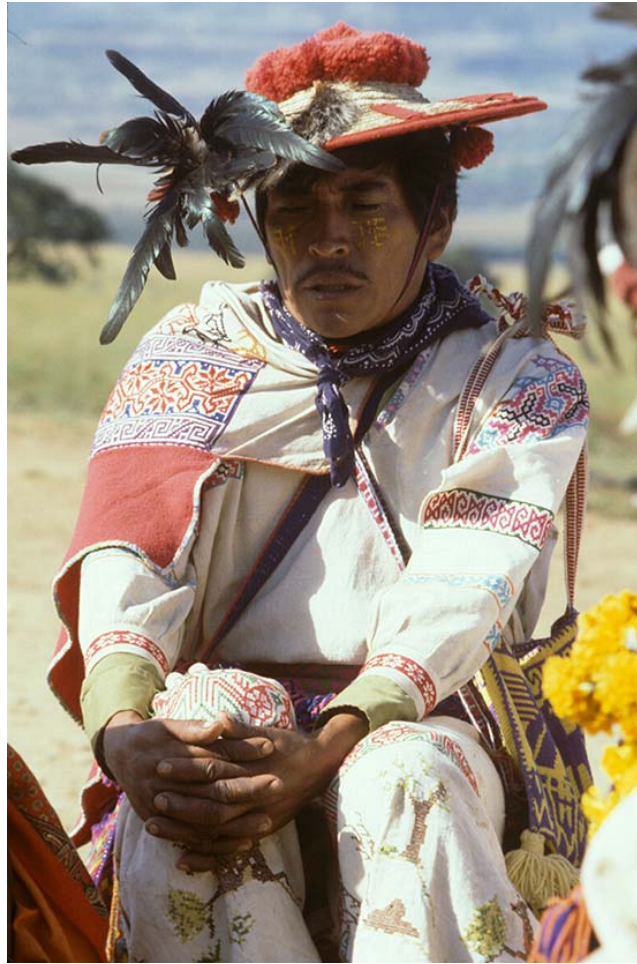


José Benítez Sánchez

In our efforts to discover the more gifted craftspeople and learn what they could tell us about their artwork's symbolic and legendary meanings, we ventured into different parts of the states of Jalisco and Nayarit, where the Huichol are concentrated. In 1971, we met José Benítez Sánchez, who had set up his workshop in Tepic, Nayarit, and whose reputation as a yarn painter was beginning to eclipse that of most of his peers.

He was born in 1938 on a ranch called San Pablito in Nayarit and given the name *Yucauye Cucame*, "Silent Walker," in the Huichol language. His religious tradition and family ties link him to the Huichol subgroup of *Wautiia* (the community of San Sebastián Teponahuastlán). He was brought up by his maternal grandfather, who died at the age of 105, leaving a strong impression on José's memory, and his stepfather, Pascual Benítez. Both of them were *maraakate* (shamans).



José Benítez Sánchez ~ © 1977 Juan Negrín

Following the proper disciplines with his stepfather and his grandfather, José worked in the fields when he was eight; the next year, his stepfather decided to train him as a shaman. He caught a deer in a snare before it died; this was a good omen. He was told to breathe in the last exhalations of the sacrificial deer and thus began to initiate a shamanic career by the age of nine. Afterward, he was instructed to go into mourning for the deer for six years, during which time he should not touch a woman or spice his food with salt.

During the next four years, José Benítez made yearly pilgrimages to Our Mother Ocean and to the holy spots in the canyons deep in the Huichol mountains. When he reached the age of fourteen, however, his stepfather died and he was forced by his relatives to marry, according to Huichol custom. Soon thereafter, he ran away, seeking work in the coastal fields and going out into the civilization of Mexico without knowing any Spanish. José Benítez said, "When I started working as a coastal laborer, I left my Huichol clothes and my sandals, changing them for Mexican clothes, and I soon felt like a *mestizo*. I never forgot my traditional customs, but

it was not the same, because I had abandoned my plans for becoming a *maraakame* (shaman).”

No doubt he felt more like a *mestizo* as he quickly picked up the Mexican language and Mexican ways at such an early age. In 1971, he was working at the government’s Coordinating Center for the Development of the Huicot Region.¹ He received a steady income from the government as a jack-of-all-trades, serving whenever a bilingual interpreter was needed for matters concerning land disputes and other problems in the mountains. Besides producing his own yarn paintings, he was a middleman between the government and those Indians who sold their crafts through its offices.

José Benítez came to be recognized as an undisputed master of original dramatic compositions, and his knowledge of the culture was respected by other craftsmen specializing in this medium by 1971. Many copied his style as best they could, a few achieving personal touches that kept their own work original. But José Benítez remains unsurpassed in the abundance and inventiveness of his art over the long span of his still-evolving career.

The first craftsmen who introduced me to Benítez touted him as an important shaman, although Benítez told me soon afterward that he had not really achieved that status yet. Since then, however, he claims to have reached it, after many pilgrimages and related sacrifices.

At that early point, Benítez had taught several dozen Huichol how to make yarn paintings. His apprentices were Huichol who had become urbanized enough to eke out a living without depending entirely on their subsistence-farming tradition. Among them, Juan Ríos Martínez mastered his own forms and style and went on to produce beautiful and original compositions. Others worked out a superficially personal style while basically sticking to simple compositions that they had at one time helped their master produce, filling in the background for the figures that Benítez had already designed.

It became apparent to us that José Benítez was the anonymous living source of the designs produced by many inferior craftsmen. His work easily surpassed that of the relatively famous and accomplished Ramón Medina, who had been killed in 1971.

By 1972, my wife and I were residing permanently in Mexico and working constantly with many native people. Most significantly, at that time I made my first forays into the deepest canyons of the Huichol mountains—to *Teakata*, the temple of Our Grandfather (Fire)—with Benítez, who had begun his initiation there as a youth. Circumstances had interrupted his shamanic practice until I prompted him to return with me. This led to many ensuing pilgrimages to the holy power spots in the mountains, to the peyote desert in the East, to Our Mother of the Ocean in the West, and to Our Mother of the South Waters, in all of which he and I participated under the direction of his half-brothers, both *maraakate* from *Wautiia*.

¹ “Huicot” stands for Huichol, Cora, and Tepehuano Indians, and their region includes portions of the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Durango, and Zacatecas.

Eventually, José Benítez's artistic expression became more complex, and I became more able to distill a deeper meaning from his works due to our shared experiences. As a result of our pilgrimage in early 1972, he dedicated himself exclusively to developing his artistic talent and renewing his links with his religious tradition. His pending vows would persecute him in agitated dreams until he externalized them as visual images, and we eventually reached the spot where the sacred offerings had to be taken again. That experience would lead to many more visionary understandings of traditional reality.

Together, we went on five journeys to *Wirikuta*, in the East. On three occasions we walked and fasted in the desert for seven days, and walked several times to the most holy spots in the mountains: *Tuamuxawitá*, the cave of the First Cultivator; *Nuariwametá*, the falls and the niche of Our Mother the Messenger of Rain; *Teakata*, the prototypal ceremonial center above the birthplace of Our Grandfather (Fire). We went to the edge of Our Mother Ocean by the white peak in the sea called *Waxiewe*, Our Mother Who Is like White Vapor Escaping, and to *Xapaviyemetá*, the lake in the South named after its wild figs, where it is said that the new earth first appeared after a five-year flood.

Benítez took extended breaks from pursuing his art when he undertook these pilgrimages, and eventually reintegrated himself into the Huichol community of Wautüa, where he followed the tradition of cultivating the land and participating in all the ceremonial rites attached to that cycle. At that time (the early 1980s), the artist said “This is how the *xutúrite*² suffer: without food or sleep, without possessions or knowing where they are headed, poor and innocent, but rich in their *kupuri* (soul) and in their *tukari* (spiritual life).”

In a composition he wrote for a Huichol *xaweri*, a native adaptation of a violin, he chants in praise of *Tamatsi Kayyumari*, Our Elder Brother Fawn of the Sun, saying, “My Elder Brother's word and his figures, his designs, his thought is never-ending in the drawings of his *matsuwate* (wrist guards or bracelets) and in his *uxa* (the yellow pigment painted on his face).”



José Benítez Sánchez
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He was conscious that many of the yarn paintings he produced in partnership with me are reflections of the ancestors, and he said, “Our memory will stay in these paintings.” These were visual expressions of what Benítez had learned under the spiritual guidance of Our

² *Xutúrite* are natural or paper flowers attached to an offering, and also the nickname for the Huichol in the language of Our Ancestors.

Elder Brother, which he wanted me to understand in depth by tape-recording explanations that allowed me to pursue their meaning in detail.

Important traditional shamans from the mountains have visited me, and they are often struck by the lucidity of Benítez's work, reflecting deeply on its meaning in their own way. His art



Four Aspects of the Spirit
José Benítez Sánchez

has undergone many changes over the 31 years that I have been a witness to its development. His figures have always been bold and dramatically placed in dynamic juxtapositions, with a deep understanding of color and contrast (see *The Four Aspects of the Spirit*, a 2' x 2' yarn painting). They started out as relatively ingenuous depictions and within a few years became more complex, as well as more intricately connected.

José Benítez created some pieces in a 4' x 2½' size, like *The Dismemberment of Our Great-Grandmother Nakawé* and *The Dismemberment of Watákame*, from 1973, which show surprising parallels to the finest works of surrealistic and contemporary fine art. He evolved from a

classical to a more baroque style, as his narratives became more complex and his inventiveness was invigorated by the many pilgrimages and his return to his roots. Another painting of this size from 1979, titled *The Nierika of Our Great-Grandfather Deer-Tail*, exemplifies this inspired complexity.

By 1980, José Benítez's art had become extremely sophisticated, and the meaning was difficult to extrapolate from his greatest work. The best example of this is a 4' x 8' yarn painting called *The Transcendental Vision of Tatutsí Xuweri Timaiweme* (Our Great-Grandfather Who Was Created and Found Knowing Everything). It toured many world museums until it was donated to the National Museum of Anthropology and History in Mexico City, for permanent exhibit, in September 1999.

A Spanish-language CD-ROM kiosk has been installed next to the painting in the exhibition hall, from which a detailed description of Huichol culture can be gleaned as one searches through the meanings of the symbols in the yarn painting. The description is based partly on the transcription of a tape-recorded interpretation the artist made with me, and partly on the anthropological perspective of the Western Section Curator, Dr. Johannes Neurath.

A constant characteristic of Benítez's art is that his figures are abstract enough to remain symbolic prototypes, yet are reproduced in many unique variations, transformed by the presence of other figures in a context that is full of interlinking energy fields and sharp contrasts. His strong sense of rhythm and balance reflects his skill in performing Huichol music and dances. He used both thick and thin wool yarn to achieve rich textures and to avail himself of the widest range of color tones.

José Benítez has continued to evolve and develop his style with the thin acrylic yarn that is currently available. He had to leave *Wautiia* after a short stay, when his community indicated it felt he could not be trusted because he was too ambitious. He then moved back to Tepic and fought for the rights of many Huichol who lived in the slums and on the periphery of town. They were eventually able to claim homes in a colony called *Zitakua*. This is today a refuge for many Huichol who have left the mountains to pursue crafts in the city. It has its Huichol *tatoani*, or governor, and a *tuki*, or round temple, at the top of a hill.

José Benítez is no longer an anonymous Huichol craftsman, although the public in general has still not properly recognized him as an artist. At the time of this writing, some of his works on display remains unidentified, as does most Huichol art on display, with rare exceptions. However, José Benítez has always performed better than the average Huichol in resisting anonymity, and in 2001, he created the largest yarn painting to date, which was commissioned by the government and placed behind a huge glass frame in a subway station in Guadalajara. Most recently, in 2003, the Museo Zacatecano of Zacatecas also gave prominent display to one of his 4' × 4' paintings.

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